Museum Marketing and Disability Access

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Abstract

This article examines museum marketing and disability access, specifically the variety of ways museums market their accessible programs to people with disabilities. Five prominent U.S. art museums were selected to investigate the marketing methods they use to promote access to audiences with disabilities. The results indicate that word of mouth and the use of technology, such as websites and social media, were the most common forms of marketing methods used to reach people with disabilities. These findings provide museums and the disability community with valuable insight about what accessible amenities, programs, and events museums are currently offering and the avenues by which museums market them.

Keywords: Marketing, Museums, Disability Access, Social Inclusion

1. Introduction

With the development and implementation of the American's with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990, and the document Everyone's Welcome: The Americans with Disabilities Act and Museums published in 1998, museums have been encouraged to focus on producing innovative exhibition designs and programs that offer user-friendliness, accessibility, and rich learning opportunities for all museum visitors (Constantine, 2007). Additional accessibility documents have surfaced since, such as the Access for All Self-Assessment Toolkit (2004) published by the Museums and Libraries Archive, indicating that the United States of America (U.S.) museums are not alone in their pursuit of accessibility. Legislation in more than twenty-five countries has been enacted to protect the rights of people with disabilities (Constantine, 2007). Australia and the United Kingdom have their own versions of the ADA, called the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA), both of which are fashioned closely after the ADA (Disability Rights, 1998).

To abide by the law, museums have had to make changes to ensure that all people, including those with disabilities, have the same opportunities and experiences as everyone else. Museums have also continued to evolve over time as society shifts and changes. Over the past decade, museums have focused more and more on their disability access offerings with an increased focus on museum marketing (Taheri, O'Gorman & Baxter, 2016).

There is increased awareness and research regarding the importance of disability access in art museums (Sandell, Dodd, & Garland-Thomson, 2010). In this article, disability access is examined along with the ways that museums market to people with disabilities. The goal of this research is to provide information about some of the current accessibility practices in museums and how these are being marketed to the disability community. This may assist museums in developing relevant and creative marketing strategies and in turn attract broader audiences.

There is a myriad of ways that museums can market themselves, however, it was evident through this research that the two primary methods used to market to people with disabilities are by word of mouth and through the use of different technologies.

As they have adjusted their missions and goals to be *accessible to all*, there have been continued efforts to implement more specific marketing strategies to audiences with disabilities, many of which are discussed in this article. However, there are still opportunities for art museums to further advance disability access. This research provides greater awareness about what accessible amenities, programs, and events museums are offering and the ways by which museums market them.

This article is organized into five sections. The first section provides an introduction outlining the general topic and data collection strategy. The second section includes the literature review, which builds a theoretical framework and outlines museum marketing and advertising strategies. This section also discusses museum branding and current museum marketing trends. The third section overviews the research methodology as it is applied to this research and includes information about the sampling strategy, the interview process, and data analysis procedures. The fourth section presents the research findings and the final section contains the discussion and conclusions that focus upon the implications of the research results and offers suggestions for additional research.

2. The Changing Museum

The definition of museums has changed over time as society has also changed (ICOM, 2014). Museums have transformed from object-based collections to people-based institutions (Komarac, 2014). Today, museums aspire to meet the needs and wants of its visitors (Komarac, 2014). As such, a number of museums are determined to improve visitor experiences (Kawashima, 1999). Despite these efforts some museums fall short in building loyalty from their audiences and attracting new visitors (Balloffet, Courvoisier & Lagier, 2014).

Balloffet et al. (2014), suggested that four primary things have forced museums to modify their marketing strategies and offerings to different audiences: (1) the ease of travel; (2) the mass production and easy access of cameras; (3) the invention of radio and television, and (4) the digital revolution. These advances in society provide people with access to previously closed "cabinets of curiosities," (Mauriès, 2002, p. 10) which can typically be explored in a variety of ways, including electronic media. Now, more than ever, this is also true for people with disabilities in the variety of ways as they can now access museum collections and information through new digital technologies.

As institutions that belong to a broader cultural leisure market, art museums are strongly influenced by visitors who seek immersive experiences (Conway & Leighton, 2012). This has encouraged museums to switch their historical focus on collections by providing visitor-friendly experiences. Marketing is no longer an optional instrument but is a survival tool by which to generate new or repeat visitors (Rentschler & Hede, 2007).

According to McCall (2002), marketing is the different ways that a company or organization reaches a prospective client or customer. In other words, marketing is "everything an organization does to facilitate an exchange between itself and its customers/clients," (McCall, 2002, p. 1). In this article, the term 'marketing' is used as a broad term to include the myriad of methods museums use to promote their goods and services.

3. Marketing and Advertising in the Museum: A Theoretical Approach

The foundational period of museum marketing occurred in the mid-1970s until the mid-1980s Rentschler (2002). However, as society has shifted toward instant gratification, today's museumgoers tend to "want it all and want it now" (Mencarelli, Marteaux, & Pulh, 2010, p. 331). As such, some museums integrate education and entertainment in their offerings, referred to as 'edutainment' (Addis, 2005). The edutainment experience is a form of entertainment in which individuals learn at the same time (Addis, 2005). The influence of edutainment has spread rapidly not just in the arts and cultural industry, but also in society due, in part, to emerging technologies (Addis, 2005). The 'e-factor' or entertainment factor has quickly become a driving force in the global economy and offering entertaining content and experiences is becoming imperative to capture the public's attention (Balloffet et al., 2014). Consumers now desire memorable experiences that they can connect to on a personal level.

Not all museum professionals, however, have embraced edutainment. Kotler, Kotler and Kotler (2008), argue that many museum staff believe that implementing entertainment will hinder the very mission of museums.

While some museum professionals are in favor of edutainment, others doubt the benefits of excessive "spectacularization" and believe that an experience-centered approach will compromise their offerings (Balloffet et al., 2014, p. 11).

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Pine and Gilmore (1999) suggest that the more effective the experience is in being able to engage all the senses, the more memorable it is likely to be. This provides creative possibilities for museums in regard to implementing marketing strategies for people with disabilities, particularly since they often rely on heightened senses to navigate the world. The tendency of society to want everything 'now' also explains why museum audiences are turning to time-efficient arrangements (Mencarelli et al., 2010). This has led to greater technological developments in museums leading to the emergence of virtual museums. Museums now have greater interest in the digitalization of their collections because they want to make the content of museums accessible to the wider public in a more attractive way (Styliani, Fotis, Kostas & Petros 2009), and this includes to those with disabilities.

Once thought of as a potential threat to museums, virtual museums now receive high recognition. Virtual museums have become a welcome opportunity to spread a museum's message to a more diverse audience, and are in turn, an enticing reason to visit the physical museum. Carrozzino and Bergamasco (2010) even advocate the use of immersive virtual reality (VR) in museums. "VR is nowadays more and more used as education…or storytelling tool" (Carrozzino & Bergamasco, 2010, p. 453). Contemporary museum visitors are constantly in search of intelligent, fun, interactive education and of overall immersive experiences. An example of new technologies used in museums to promote different sensory experiences and exciting leisure activities, is the use of telepresence robots. Such technology, in the future, may provide real time experiences to people who may not be able to visit the museum for a variety of reasons. For example, children who are hospital bound who would like to attend the museum but cannot due to health reasons could benefit from robotic tours where the robot moves around the museum to view the artworks in an enticing and interactive way.

Some museums are using new programs as marketing tools to reach specific audiences with disabilities. For example, 3D printing technology allows museums to print 3D replicas of museum objects, whereas others offer verbal descriptions, and touch tours for people who are blind or visually impaired. These programs and others enable visitors to engage with the museum and its collection by using senses, such as touch, while also utilizing new and emerging technologies. Other examples include tactile areas for the blind or visually impaired where tables are set in areas around the museums that contain objects or artworks for people to touch and explore. The popularity of iPads has led to new methods of reaching audiences. For example, visitors can now access closed captioning, audio, larger images, or even sign language to assist with a tour through a museum. These offerings can be marketed specifically to those in the disability community and are just some of the ways that museums use marketing strategies to broaden their audiences and to brand their own image as an organization.

3.1 Museum Branding

In the marketing industry, there are different types of brands (Scott, 2000). According to Scott (2000), museums fall into the category of 'values' or a brand that has a lasting central purpose and attempts to create an enduring connection with segments of the market sharing the same values (2000).

Brand identity is separate from brand image (Aaker, 1996). Brand identity generally relates to how the organization defines itself whereas brand image relates to how the consumer perceives the organization and its products (Pusa & Uusitalo, 2014). Museums, therefore, should actively manage their brand identity instead of allowing their brand image to dictate the brand. According to Aaker, brand identity can be assessed in the following ways: product, person, symbol, and organization (1996). When the museum is viewed as a 'product,' there may be both a core product and an augmented product. For example, museum collections and exhibitions would be considered the core product and museum's services, such as education programs, the augmented product. Even museum's target audiences, including people with disabilities, may be a product feature of a museum.

More museums are turning to marketing and branding to assist in broadening their audience base. The value of the museum's brand closely relates to its perceived quality or the visitor's perception of the museum's overall quality or service (Caldwell, 2000). Perceived quality is considered the most significant factor in defining the strength of a brand (Gale, 1994; Aaker, 1996). Brands that achieve greater earnings are those that have convinced customers that they offer a quality product or service (Gale, 1994).

McNichol suggests that museums need to be "creative and visionary nonprofit organizations that continuously strive to meet the needs of the communities they serve" (2005, p. 241). Not surprisingly, this is the goal for many museum staff currently seeking new ways to market their accessibility programs to audiences with disabilities, to ensure the perceived quality of the museum remains high in the minds of potential audiences.

Museums are structures that create meaning and must continue to provide meaning and direction for their potential audiences (Daft & Weick, 1984). By considering their target audiences in marketing and branding strategies, and by involving and inviting these audiences to assist in some of the program offerings, museums are more likely to be perceived as a quality organization worthy of a visit.

3.2 Museum Marketing Trends

Museums face fierce competition from other entertainment and cultural attractions, including restaurants, sports arenas, theaters and shopping malls, and even from cyberspace, i.e., the Internet. The contemporary consumer continuously pursues new experience and organizations must continually adapt their marketing approach to meet consumer expectations. Under relational and experiential marketing approaches, consumers are targeted to promote the actual, in-person experience of museums (Colbert & Courshesne, 2012).

However, not everyone is convinced of the wholesale use of museum marketing, fearing a process of manipulation akin to what may be found in the business world (Kesner, 2006). They fear that museums may become seen as products (Kesner, 2006). Kesner argues that the museum experience can be turned into a commodity in which it is expected to package and deliver to audiences, overlooking human and cultural aspects (2006).

The current climate for museum marketing is largely one that aims to produce an immersive visitor experience that can be created by using technology and creative ideas. From guerilla-marketing campaigns, to moving museums to sites that better suit their demographic target audience, to establishing corporate work places, to building business and social services partnerships, museums are rethinking their marketing strategies. For example, a large East coast museum has in the U.S, partnerships with local hospitals and medical groups whereby they host small groups of people who are ill or physically incapacitated to enter the museum after hours to view artworks. Such events are planned and tailored to the specific needs of those who are ill, have disabilities or both.

4. Research Methodology

This qualitative research is an emergent methodology research design. Two research questions have been undertaken as follows:

1. *In what ways do museums advertise and market their accessible offerings to people with disabilities?* and
2. *What tools do museums use to market their accessible offerings to those with disabilities?*

Semi-structured phone interviews of art museum staff from five art museums across the United States of America were conducted. Questions were asked regarding the implementation of, and dedication to, disability access within the participant's museum, including the advertising and marketing of disability access for museum visitors. Data was also collected from each participating museum's website. A descriptive analysis was conducted of the website's accessibility information, including the types of accessible programs and services offered by each museum.

4.1 Sampling Strategy

To provide rich information about the advertising and marketing of access offerings in museums, staff who oversee, or work in disability access departments of the museum, were interviewed. While the responsibility of access and inclusion in museums is typically the charge of all museum staff and administration, museum staff delegated with these specific responsibilities were contacted, including those who had direct responsibilities for producing access programs, tools, and offerings and those charged with the advertising and marketing of these services to audiences with disabilities.

Five museums were selected based on their known and established accessibility programs and offerings for the disability community. Geographical location was also taken into consideration and the museums selected for research were those that spanned the United States. The purpose of this was to establish a broader view of museum disability access marketing across the country.

Two museums were on the East coast (Museum A and Museum B); one in the Mid-West (Museum C); one in the Mountain region (Museum D) and one on the West coast (Museum E).

Data were analyzed logically, demonstrating that themes stemming from the data were not pre-determined (Janesick, 1994). In the first stage of coding, written transcripts of the audio-recorded interviews were read by the researcher to establish if there were any similarities or differences between data. Similar data was then grouped together and the text was then manually coded to classify the grouped data (Berg, 1989). After further examination of the data, information emerged which revealed noteworthy findings regarding marketing and advertising, disability access and social inclusion. Several codes developed in the initial analysis of interview data contributed to the emergence of 10 broad themes or categories.

For many visitors, museum websites are the first point of reference when seeking new information. Websites, therefore, provide an important opportunity for museums to communicate their accessibility, inclusiveness, and disability programs. Each museum's website, therefore, was analyzed to determine how the museum uses their website as a marketing tool. Data was entered and organized into a table of all participating museums and included: the museum's name, the visibility of the accessible information on the website, the clarity of the accessible information, and types of accessible programs and offerings of the museum. Text analysis was conducted on each museum to identify which museums had the same accessible offerings and information on their websites. This information was then compared against the museum staff interviewee data regarding marketing and accessibility as a form of triangulation to help validate the information.

5.   Results from Interviews and Website Data

Ten broad themes emerged from the data and in no hierarchical order they were: (1) museum 2) access/inclusion for all, 3) access tools/services, 4) access technology, 5) barriers to access, 6) facilitators of access, 7) benefits of access, 8) marketing/advertising, 9) audience development, and 10) measuring assess. These themes were analyzed focusing on marketing for disability access in art museums. From these themes, two marketing areas emerged: word of mouth and outreach, and technology marketing.

5.1 Word of Mouth and Outreach Approach

The five museums that were investigated carried out their word of mouth marketing to people with disabilities through a variety of methods, such as outreach to local schools for the blind. For example, a Museum D staff member stated, "We have a local school for the blind … and I've worked with them as well as another school for blind children to invite them to the museum because … a lot of the time there's people who have never been before especially if it's a visual art museum and so you think about people with low vision might not necessarily feel comfortable, so how can we kind of cross those boundaries."

Some museum staff contacted local businesses that cater for people with disabilities. For example, one museum reached out to a local Autism community store and advertised to parents of autistic children about the programs and tools that the museum offers for autistic audiences. Interviewee from Museum D said, "For the Low Sensory Morning for families with kids with autism, I reached out to different parent's groups that were in the city that we knew of. We also have a local store … that sells different therapeutic materials and toys for kids and therapists ... talking to parents saying, 'do you want a program?' ... ok, then what does that look like?"

Some museum staff commented on the power of word of mouth marketing: "A lot of it [marketing] is kind of word of mouth … we have different parent's groups that are support groups for people with disabilities …we send things out thanking them saying 'share this among your group,'" and "Just having someone out in the community more talking to more people about the programs that we have at the museum and then kind of just word of mouth from there has really increased."

Other examples of word of mouth outreach included contacting local deaf community groups, and even recruiting docents from the disability community to help participate in museum activities and promote specific programs to people in the disability community. Staff noted the importance of a diverse museum staff so that people with disabilities feel comfortable. "So, for our programs for deaf people we really try and ask our deaf educators or American Sign Language (ASL) educators to help us spread the word through their networks and to get their advice on…where to advertise," (Museum C), "The volunteers and staff that people interact with at the museum should reflect the population for people to feel comfortable. So, I'm really trying to recruit docents with disabilities too." (Museum B).

All five museums had goals to be 'accessible to all' and they carried out some form of formal marketing and promotion of museum's accessible offerings through technological or electronic means. All museums utilized their own websites to advertise their programs and make accommodations for people with a variety of disabilities. In addition, other community websites were used to help cross-promote accessible offerings. For example, the Cultural Accessibility Consortium serves the disability community in promoting all kinds of programs and events that cater for those with disabilities in the Midwest, hence, the Midwest museum also promoted themselves on that website.

Social media was another important tool used to promote accessible offerings. All the museums had Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram accounts and some used additional social media sites, such as, Pinterest, YouTube, and Tumblr. A staff member from Museum E said, "So social media really helped us get the word out … social media as a means of getting it out there and then it kind of takes a life of its own through creating a Facebook events page for that tour. Then as people join, say that they're going to the event, they'll tag their friends and then their friends will join. So, it just creates a bit of a cascading domino effect."

In addition, personalized emails and large-scale email campaigns (e-blasts) to lists of targeted contacts interested in accessible offerings were used to market museums services and programs. "We also do emails, targeted emails by audience about…upcoming programs and then include those audiences in programming like our upcoming festivals … we make sure to target our list of audiences with different disabilities there as well and really also do other kinds of outreach to connect people and not just like tell people about it in a passive way."

Museum D also had its own blog to help promote the museum's offerings. A staff member at this museum said, "We have a blog that we will blog through and we'll share information about our events … but I think we need to be a little bit more creative with how we're really targeting specific parts of our community through those posts."

Additional marketing included print advertising, such as brochures and calendar of events and guides. Museum A created an Access Guide, which included every program, event, and accommodation that the museum had for people with disabilities. This was updated twice a year and available in printed form as well as available for download from the museum's website.

Two out of the five museums had their own mobile phone applications (apps), which were available to download on a visitor's smartphone. App users could access all the same information that is available on museum's websites regarding its collections and exhibitions along with all programs and events. For Museum A, disability access staff were involved with the design of their custom-made app from the beginning, helping to optimize visual accessibility and make it compatible to screen readers and to ensure the content was accessible.

A Museum B's staff member noted that in some of their general audience advertisements they included images of people visiting museums who have disabilities in order to show people with disabilities, that people who visit museums 'look like them.'

Each participating museum regarded their websites as effective marketing tools to reach audiences with disabilities. All but one of the participating museums had accessibility information prominently displayed through either one or two clicks. Museum B required website viewers to click through three pages of their website and then scroll to the bottom of a page to learn about the museum's accessibility and disability program information. In all other museums, access information was easily found under tabs, such as, 'Visit' or 'Plan Your Visit'. In addition, all the participating museums' websites had a clear layout of the accessibility information, including general information about physical access to the museum and museum services.

Three of the five museums also had a clearly positioned statement about the museum's commitment to include all visitors, including those with disabilities. This was evident by the manner which these museums communicated their services to all patrons. For example, information tailored to different segments of the disability community were clearly organized under sub-headings, such as 'For Individuals who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing' or 'For Individuals who are Blind or Visually Impaired' or 'For Individuals Living with Dementia' or 'For Individuals with Limited Mobility.'

Each museum displayed services and/or programs for the blind or visually impaired, for the deaf and hard of hearing, and for people with limited mobility. Three of the museums had sub-headings listing information or programs specifically for 'Individuals with Dementia', and one of the five museums had programs listed for 'Individuals with Developmental or Learning Disabilities.'

The Museum A website also included a link to the disability access guide in .pdf file format. This guide was extensive and included not only general accessibility information but further information about every assessable program and event. Museum D provided a fact sheet and accessible map of the museum along with other brief accessible information broken down into categories for people who a blind, deaf, who have limited mobility, or Alzheimer's and dementia. The guide also included brief information about a quarterly E-newsletter.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The museum industry has become more complex due to changes in society, the demand for understanding visitors and their needs, and implementing new technologies. Museums face sizeable competition in the leisure-time marketplace and are receiving less funding from governments (Cuccia & Rizzo, 2016). More leisure time activities are becoming based on their e-factor, which traditionally has not been a high priority for art museums when targeting their audiences. An instant gratification society longs for something far different than what many museums currently offer.

For many museums, marketing is a means of survival. Interest in the dynamics of museum marketing is growing, and the perception of museum marketing is changing from being an invasive force to that of a useful tool for museum promotion (Komarac, 2014). Today, the need for effective marketing is commonly accepted by museum directors and staff, although some museum professionals continue to express concerns about the way in which marketing or new technologies are tarnishing the traditional missions of museums (Balloffet et al., 2014).

The museums involved in this research certainly are aware of the value of marketing to reach specific disability audiences given the variety of specific programs and services that are offered. Examples of this were seen in programs specifically for the blind or the deaf or people on the autism spectrum. In addition, these museums are beginning to see the value of marketing strategies, such as, brand identity and image, to create and mold the identity of the museum as an organization but also to influence how audiences perceive the museum, including those with disabilities.

All five participating museums in this research indicated that their missions were to be 'accessible museums for all people,' a statement that was fundamental to their brand identity. Museum staff participating in the research confirmed that the goal of the museum was to be a place where all people could feel welcome. They believed that their respective museum provided an abundance of accessible programs, tools, and services to support their inclusiveness brand image.

New technologies provide a possible benefit, but also some challenges to museums. Some staff noted that edutainment is an inevitable trend that museums need to take advantage of in order to get closer to their visitors. Word of mouth and the use of technology, such as websites and social media, are the most common forms of marketing used to reach to people with disabilities. When implemented broadly to the disability community, results suggest that there is increased awareness of museum missions and their goal to become accessible to all. Most museums already have websites, email lists, social media, exhibitions, and/or other programs to reach people with disabilities. All museums can easily adapt their websites and social media to promote inclusiveness in a manner that is clear and relatively easy to find. Staff member from Museum C referenced another museum in the same city that had discussed taking accessibility a step further and consulting with web accessible experts to create virtual spaces that are user friendly to those who may use screen reader software or need other accessible features. Such conversations are healthy among museum circles for staff to learn about new and innovative ways to utilize technologies to promote disability access.

Overall, the participating museum websites provided ample information about their accessible offerings and these were well organized and generally easy to find. However, Museum B required viewers to click through an unnecessarily large number of pages or links to find information about disability access offerings. The researcher noted that further improvements could be made to this museums' web tools and features to make it more 'user-friendly'. In general, the participating museum staff were actively looking for ways to develop their web pages and links further to make them even more accessible to people with disabilities.

For example, Museum C's staff member described a plan to consult with an accessible technology consultant to ensure that in future all images have clear descriptions for screen reader software that members of the blind community would use.

This research investigated the specific marketing strategies of five museums across the United States as they market to people with disabilities. While this is not an exhaustive investigation of museum marketing, it did, however, reveal some of the key tools that museums use to reach people with disabilities. The hope is that the data and results presented in this study will assist other museums in learning how they can become more inclusive and accessible using practical tools and cost-effective outreach methods. More research, however, is still needed in the U.S. on a national scale on the effectiveness of museum word of mouth and digital marketing to know whether these are the most effective methods of marketing compared to other traditional forms since this sample size is relatively small. Additional research could also assist museums in how they better market their services to people with disabilities. Due to the wide variety of disabilities and museums, there is not a 'one size fits all' approach that will work for all museums. However, further investigation into museum marketing for people with disabilities will provide museums with additional data that may assist them in becoming more accessible and inclusive to those with disabilities. Finally, future research should include the insights and recommendations of people with disabilities to understand what forms of marketing are most beneficial and create an overall sense of inclusiveness for everyone.

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